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AUTHOR Richardson, Donald
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ABSTRACT

Based on over half a century's personal experience with the Australian community's poor understanding of art, this paper concludes that exposing thousands of secondary students to the subject "Art" over this period has had little or no effect on competency. Instances are documented. Possible reasons explored include: the common methodology dubbed "the bootstraps theory of art education" (encouraging self-expression together with avoidance of inculcation) while the commercial and entertainment worlds adopt the opposite methodology; the related misunderstanding of the principles of Modernism; and teachers' inability to distinguish among the principles of "art," "design," and "craft." These three terms are analyzed. (Author/BT)

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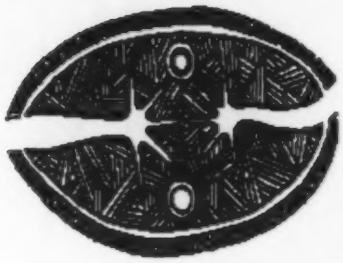

InSEA

"The Failure of Art Education"

by

Donald Richardson
21 Druids Avenue
Mount Barker, South Australia

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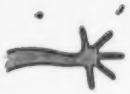

THE FAILURE OF ART EDUCATION

Donald Richardson

21 Druids Avenue, Mount Barker, South Australia 5251 Telephone 08.83982185

(abstract)

Having had personal experience of the Australian community's poor understanding of art for over half a century, the presenter concludes that exposing thousands of secondary students to the subject Art over this period has had little or no effect on this understanding. Instances are documented.

Possible reasons explored include: the common methodology dubbed 'the bootstraps theory of art education' (encouraging self-expression together with avoidance of inculcation) while the commercial and entertainment worlds adopt the opposite methodology; the related misunderstanding of the principles of Modernism; and teachers' inability to distinguish between the principles of *art*, *design* and *craft* (the latter three terms are analysed).

Paper presented at the 30th World Congress of the International Society for Education Through Art, Brisbane Convention and Exhibition Centre, 21-26 September, 1999, with the assistance of the South Australian Country Arts Trust.

For one who has devoted most of his forty-year professional life to art education, presenting this paper - or, rather, the need to have to write it - is a dismal thing. The failure of art education is not something that pleases me, but I have recently come to admit to myself that this is precisely what has happened. Let me explain.....

This will not be an old chap reminiscing about how good it was in the old days because it was *not* 'good' in the days of my youth. The problem is that *I cannot see that it is any better now* - after fifty years of the teaching of art in primary and secondary schools across the nation (indeed, most of the western world). During this time, countless school-generations of children have been exposed to the subject - why is it, then, that I find that almost all of the first-year students who come to me at the university are totally ignorant of the merest facts about world (even Australian) art and design, let alone able to make a simple judgement or coherent statement about art or design? And these are the best-educated young people in the nation.

I am sure that I am not alone in having this experience. I have not read any recent research in the matter but, I remember that, in 1992, *Australian Art Monthly* reported (March, 1992, p.23) that 200 undergraduate students at Monash and Melbourne universities were asked to name three famous Australian painters. Three quarters were unable to name one and, of the rest, 38% listed Pro Hart and 17% Ken Done. I am sure that there would be much the same result from a similar survey in my university - or yours! - today. And - this, in principle, is just how it used to be when I was a young man!

I don't know if people still speak of the 'Dobell Prize' for portraiture (ie the Archibald Prize, but it used to be commonplace. How many times when you have told your students that you have a picture in an exhibition have you had the rejoinder: 'Did you win?' This is what I call 'the royal show syndrome': the belief that art only has an accepted place in a competition - something like an aesthetic grand final!

We know that competition is very alive and well in both commercial and government circles these days, so we should not be surprised that teachers in schools are continually plagued by requests from commercial and charity interests alike to have their charges participate in child-art competitions. This in spite of the cogent arguments against child-art competitions which Viktor Lowenfeld gave us over fifty years ago (in his *Creative and Mental Growth,* 1947) and the fact that most professional associations of art educators have for years advised against them. We are just not getting our message across!

But, the most condemning proof of art education's failure is the general public's rank lack of understanding of modernism (let alone post-modernism). We all know this abundantly from casual conversation but, from time to time, an influential curator comes out with it publicly. When the National Gallery of Australia bought Picasso's *Still Life with Mask* (1937) a few years ago, a senior curator was forced to lament (I read my version in *The Advertiser* of 27/10/'92) 'It seems odd that we're nearly at the end of the 20th century and yet most people have not understood the art of the 20th century'. It seems more than 'odd' to me - 'tragic' would be more to the point!

The one issue of *The Age* in 1992 (12/6/'92) reported gallery director Dr Gene Sherman saying of a Caro-type welded sculpture '...you couldn't ask a normal, intelligent person in the street to appreciate it...' and also that university students had destroyed an abstract sculpture. More recently I used my handkerchief to wipe from Adelaide University's wonderful Henry Moore sculpture an inscription which read: 'Do you need this?' Perhaps I should be relieved that it was written in chalk and not spray-paint.

And Melbourne is still unresolved about its 'yellow peril' - Ron Robertson-Swann's fine sculpture *Vault*, which was ignominiously removed from that city's now-aborted City Square and still has not found a permanent home....Again, in Melbourne, Denton Corker Marshall's recent Tullarmarine structures have been heavily criticised - even by cartoonist Michael Leunig. Someone has called the 'blade and poles' a 'fascist salute'!

And, if you are inclined to be uncharitable about Melbourne, don't be (I am not). Sydney has - or, rather - *had* its Flugelman sculpture.... And you need only remember the fate of Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* in New York City....I am sure we all have knowledge of similar examples of community leaders failing to understand and appreciate modern art - of the failure of art education,in fact - so I hope that I have made my case.

(Perhaps I should just refer finally to the current efforts of the Australia Council for the Arts to generate in the public more interest in the arts. The Council has had a Community Arts Board for I don't know how many years, yet 'the community' still does not appreciate the arts well enough. I have always thought that the Community Arts Board was only found to be necessary because arts educators had failed to educate the public in the arts. Clearly they have done no better than we have!)

If you want the message from respected art educators, Kenneth Marantz and James U Grey lamented ten years ago (in *Studies in Art Education* 30, 3, 1989, pp 131-136, 185-187) about academics' apparent

'inability to conceptualise the field adequately'. I am not so tactful as Marantz and Grey: I believe that we have failed not only to conceptualise art-education theory adequately - we have failed to conceptualise art theory adequately, too. Let me explain how I think this is so.

THE FAILURE

When the pioneers of art education - Cizek, Read and Lowenfeld - spoke of 'art' they always meant 'modern art' - modernism - and assumed that we would understand this. They saw in the creative self-expression of a Picasso a paradigm for the way children should grow naturally into a sound maturity. And it is only with the appearance of modern art that we were able to see what *art* really is or can be - and the pioneer art educators realised this.

What *is* art?

It is a common-place that not even the experts can agree on a definition of *art*, but this is because they are seeking it among words, rather than works. If we examine the *works* of the masters of modernism we see that what they all believed in - and asserted - was their absolute right to free, individual, self-referent - even self-indulgent - self-expression. This is all that they have in common, because their interests and styles are diverse, but it is a very potent and significant thing. And we can see in retrospect that this is what earlier masters had been striving towards, but had been denied, because only in the twentieth-century West were conditions right for this development. Art in its true essence was never possible before in any other culture or era - and still is not possible in traditional cultures (except where artists have adopted western modernist modes). But it is this concept of art that is relevant to art (and arts) education.

To Franz Cizek must go the credit for the 'Copernican revolution' that placed art in the centre of children's lives, rather than the periphery, where it had always been before. But, from Cizek on, misunderstanding begins to cloud the issue. I am not sure whether it applies to Lowenfield and Read or not, but certainly some later art educators (Brent and Marjorie Wilson, for example) and art theorists like Ernst Gombrich and Rudolf Arnheim believed that the 'bad drawing' of a Matisse was due to inability and not to choice. Hence, it was asserted that children, to be free, should not be taught the skills of realistic representation. This was given psychological validity bv reference to Sigmund Freud (like Lowenfeld, a Viennese) who proved that repressive child-rearing led to neurosis in the adult. Hence arose the belief that, to enable children to grow to healthy adults, they needed to be encouraged to express themselves freely, but not to be taught anything.

Now, there is a lot of validity in this thesis, especially for younger children, but those of us who have taught first-year high school know that older children actually want to be *taught* the skills of visual representation. As Norman Freeman's research has demonstrated, children believe that adult art is realistic art, not stick-figures and finger-painting - and not abstraction. This realisation occurs to them at any time between the ages of (perhaps) eight and eleven - when they are in, or approaching, the celebrated 'age of repression', during which time most of them decided they have no talent and give up art for all time - if they are not given the skills they seek. This has, in fact, been the fate of most children during the fifty years art has been considered to be a valid school subject.

This is where the 'received theory' breaks down. Children wish to be taught the skills of perspective and light and shade because - having no knowledge of Matisse or Picasso - they believe that their flat, linear works are 'not art'. They want to draw like Leonardo, but their teachers want them to be Pollocks. That the modern masters could all draw realistically when it suited their creative purposes has been overlooked. Their distortions come from knowledge and control, not ignorance or lack of talent. And it is possible to teach even quite young children the skills of art without repressing their creativeness and individuality once we recognise that the creative self-expression that is natural to both young children and modernist artists can be distinguished from the craft-skills necessary to achieve this expression. It is, in fact, perfectly OK to give instruction in the <u>how</u> of art. But, if you give it in the <u>why</u> or <u>what</u>, you - the teacher - become the artist and the child merely an artisan executing your ideas.

None of this is really articulated in what I call 'the Boot-straps Theory of Art Education' because its proponents hope, however fervently, that children will - by some self-generated cognitive or affective intuition - *lift themselves* into adult art. I can think of no other field of human endeavour in which adults purposively refuse children the 'rites of passage' to adulthood. The Bootstraps Theory is responsible for excluding the vast majority of children from learning in and about art and has contributed vastly to the current situation in which most adults have no idea or appreciation of what art is all about.

In addition, it has had dire effects on school curricula; for what intelligent and responsible secondary school principal can respect a subject that it is natural for children to 'grow out of' at about the time they are transferring from primary to secondary and for which there is no legitimate role for the professionally-trained teacher, apart from motivation and baby-sitting? It is futile for us to proclaim art to be a 'basic' subject when most administrators in most fields have got to be where they are without having had worthwhile exposure to the subject themselves. They know that they are 'all right' without it!

ART AND DESIGN

Now, to return to the point about the general inadequacy of our conceptualisation of 'art': it is clear that the term 'art' as defined by the modernists can be applied to only a very small proportion of the things humans make. Most of these are *functional* - that is they are instrumental to human survival and well-being. Art *per se* is not functional (but this does not mean that it is useless!). The useful things in the world may be common, mundane objects like mass-produced housing, utensils, vehicles and clothing, or specifically-designed examples of these same things. Thus, we can classify the entire universe of things humans make as

- *art* - non-functional, creative originals,
- *design* - originally-conceived functional things (here we should recognise that the mental and aesthetic processes used by creative designers are almost identical with those used by artists: the difference is that, whereas designers work to a design-brief, no one tells - or can tell - an artist what to make), and
- *artisan* works - skilfully-crafted reproductions from original prototypes, both art and design.

There are few examples of art or design properly so-called in the world - the pictures of a Miro or Pollock and Richard Rogers's architecture come to mind. Whereas it is clear that there are many examples of artisan work in the functional realm, it helps us to appreciate true creativity if we realise that run-of-the-mill landscapes are just as much clones of prototypes by a Streeton or Constable as are mass-produced coffee-cups clones of ancient Chinese tea-bowls. Design *per se* as a category should be confined to creative examples like the Eiffel Tower and the Sydney Opera House.

I mention this because I believe that design should be as much part of a child's education as painting and sculpture are - but its has been so only rarely in the past (another failure). Children come into contact with designed objects in their everyday lives much more than they come into contact with art, but both the creative and the aesthetic side of design is as important - if not more so - than for art. I believe that (to return to Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*) if it had been realised that this acknowledged work of art made a negative statement as *design* by obstructing the view and the movement of a pedestrians in a city square, it would never have been placed there in the first place. This is yet another example of the failure of art education, in my view - the failure to realise the difference between art and design.

I hope that we can look forward to a future in which children learn to practice and understand both art and design. It would be a great benefit to humanity if this were so.